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Fragment by Craig Russell

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Hope for the Planet

***Fragment, a Novel* by CRAIG RUSSELL**

Thistledown Press, 2016, \$19.95

Reviewed by **MAREK OZIEWICZ**

Imagine that we can talk to other species and they can talk back. Imagine that we discover this at a moment of existential crisis, when our ability to communicate with non-human animals emerges as critical to our own survival. Imagine also that the existential crisis is a climate-change emergency which makes COVID-19 look like a fender-bender. And imagine an American administration that discounts climate change as leftist alarmism but will not hesitate to actively suppress evidence and manipulate facts to further its short-sighted ecocidal agenda. (Oh, wait, that part has already happened!)

Craig Russell's *Fragment* is no ordinary cli-fi. Set in the present, it tells the story of a catastrophe that becomes the entry point for ushering in an ecological, multispecies civilization. Although the transition to an ecological civilization is merely implied, *Fragment* resists the dominant cli-fi formula, in which the collapse of our civilization is unavoidable (think *The Windup Girl*) or the wholesale sociopolitical transformation is projected into a distant future (think *New York 2140*). Most contemporary cli-fi is dystopian: it evokes future catastrophes to mobilize action in the present. Unfortunately, what the disaster-framing achieves is helplessness and a wish to avoid the topic (Schneider-Mayerson). If cli-fi aspires to be a force driving people to demand "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" (IPCC Report), the greatest challenge it faces is to frame messages in ways that empower the audience. Cli-fi begins with a recognition of the ecocidal trajectory of our carbon-intense civilization. But it soars only when it offers a degree of actable hope. This *actable hope for the planet*, I believe, is the Holy Grail of cli-fi. No work to date has found it. But a few succeed in pointing in the right direction. *Fragment* is one of them.

The story is divided into five parts which serve as chronological markers of the trajectory of events: from business as usual to the world anew. Seven interconnected subplots are woven together to communicate what it at stake, and for whom, in our (in)action on climate change. Like the Citizen in Robinson's *New York 2140*, the omniscient narrator in *Fragment* gives us the sections about facts. This narrator is the only one addressing the audience directly—as in the "Consider the nature of ice" opening phrase—and controls the story by switching between chapters focused on different characters' plotlines. Three scientists—a Canadian, a New Zealander, and an Australian—witness the calving of a massive iceberg off the Ross Ice Shelf, but their attempts to warn the world about the eponymous "Fragment" are suppressed by the US government. A heroic blue whale called Ring creates a warning song about the danger of the Fragment, and his commitment to save other blues turns out to save all whales and humanity too. A TV host and his producer risk their lives by travelling to Antarctica to tell the story the government is trying to cover up. The captain and crew of a US ballistic missile submarine rescue survivors from the wreckage of an Antarctic research base and become key players in

determining whether the danger of a mega-iceberg heading north will be suppressed or publicly announced. A cruise-ship-company executive driven by self-promotion for once does some good for the world. Then, there is an American President and his bulldog advisor, whose arrogance, narcissism, and climate-change denialism would be legendary had they not been surpassed by certain people in the real world. (Yes, truth is stranger than fiction.)

As *Fragment* unfolds, we come to understand why the order of these stories matters. By giving narrative space first to scientists, then to whales, then to the military, then to the media, and then to the politicians, the novel conveys an important message about whose voices should matter most in the current discussions about our future on this planet. The prose is terse, almost reportorial. Characterization is at times skewed, especially for politicians who are caricatures of evil. Then again, compared to what we have seen since 2016, the rhetoric and actions of these fictional characters are not as unrealistic as they may appear at first.

What I most appreciate about *Fragment*, however, are two gems of hope at its heart.

First, the book articulates hope in human solidarity at times of crisis. The scientists who refuse to keep silent. The journalists who defy their corporate bosses. The submarine captain and crew who reject an order to commit murder. Thousands of fishermen and sailors who risk their lives to save people their own governments had left behind. These and other episodes from *Fragment* are concrete examples of what Rebecca Solnit has called “hope in the dark.” As we face the accelerating crises that climate change will bring, it is good to remember that we have the power to act together. We have the power to resist and change reality, even if the Daleks of techno-capitalism insist that resistance is futile.

Second, *Fragment* introduces whales and the non-human world as subjects in consideration of the planetary future. In this most delightful move, reminiscent of Shaun Tan’s *Tales from the Inner City*, the book not only reminds us that we share the planet with other beings but actually empowers another intelligent species to speak for themselves. And humans have to listen! This, of course, is a fantastic intervention but one that closely resonates with the notions of “ecodemocracy” (Gray et al.) and “making kin” (Haraway). *Fragment*, in other words, imagines hope for the planetary future through a political process in which decisions that impact multiple species are made by human and non-human representatives *together*. As I read the book, parts that describe how humans talk with whales, and what each side learns, were uncontested highlights.

We’re in a countdown to an accelerating, unprecedented climate change that is already reshaping the planet. We need “an everything change” (Atwood 139). And we need books like *Fragment* to help us remember the power of hope and of civil disobedience as forces that will end the ecocidal status quo.

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